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by TextOre analyst Gemma Sabatini

Whatever debates may have driven or divided French policymakers and the public since the end of the Cold War, support for a modest but significant independent nuclear deterrent has enjoyed consistent support across the political spectrum. Polls in France do show support for international nuclear arms reduction but, so long as nuclear weapons are in the hands of others, the French want to keep a seat at the nuclear table. While France has consistently stressed the “European component” of its nuclear doctrine and the role its deterrent plays in overall European security, President Macron has signaled that a nuclear attack by Russia on Ukraine would not be reckoned as impacting the level of “vital interests” meriting a French nuclear response.

Background - France and the Bomb

The successful creation of the French *Force de Frappe* (or “strike force”), a term originally coined by President Charles de Gaulle (1959-1969),ⁱ was an expression of de Gaulle’s desire for a greater national military independence, especially vis-à-vis the United States.ⁱⁱ De Gaulle continued this policy by withdrawing from NATO’s unified military command, a step only reversed by President Sarkozy in 2009. Later French governments renamed it *Force de Dissuasion* (“deterrent force”) but took a wider view of its role: as guaranteeing France’s national sovereignty and freedom of action, but also possessing, alongside the UK’s nuclear arsenal, a “European dimension” that “strengthen[s] the security of Europe through [its] very existence.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Charles de Gaulle | Élysée (elysee.fr)
La Documentation française/Jean-Marie Marcel

Today, France possesses around 300 nuclear warheads that provide for its direct protection and act as a deterrent force covering French interests beyond the European continent.^{iv} This arsenal is carried by air and sea components. In the air, the Strategic Air Force includes nuclear squadrons using single warhead air-to-surface missiles. At sea, France has four ballistic missile submarines, part of the

Strategic Oceanic Force command, that can each be equipped with sixteen M51 missiles carrying a variable number of nuclear warheads.^v



French Mirage 2000 (VanderWolf Images/Shutterstock.com)

French Nuclear Doctrine

With the number of states confirmed or suspected of possessing nuclear weapons now up to nine, French policymakers have incentives to maintain their capabilities. In his January 2018 speech to the Armed Forces, President Macron highlighted deterrence as the cornerstone of the French defense strategy: “Deterrence is part of our history, part of our defense strategy, and it will remain so. As our future will keep being marked by nuclear dynamics, I am convinced that our deterrence model, based on strict sufficiency, remains relevant.”^{vi} In practice, the French government is putting resources into both nuclear and conventional deterrence and defense, and calling on European allies to increase military spending as well.^{vii} The French military budget is seeing a €295 bn (\$290 bn) investment, spread over the period 2019-2025, with the aim of reaching the NATO mandated 2% of GDP budget allocation to the armed forces by 2050. The nuclear component on its own accounted for €4,120.3 million in 2021 and €4,362.8 million (\$5bn) in 2022, or approximately 20% of the total budget.^{viii}

Three major principles of France’s Nuclear Doctrine are permanence, sufficiency, and flexibility. These principles are implemented by a consistent readiness posture,^{ix} by limiting French nuclear capabilities to what appears to be strictly necessary (the 300-warhead ceiling), and by being able to adapt the deterrent threat to a changing geostrategic environment.^x As President Macron expressed it, French deterrence policy “prevents adversaries from betting on escalation, intimidation and blackmailing to achieve their ends.”^{xi} The flexibility principle is nuanced. While Macron declared in

2020 “that nuclear weapons [will not] be considered as a battlefield weapons... [and] that France will never engage into a nuclear battle or any forms of graduated response,” he also allowed that, “should there be any misunderstanding about France’s determination to protect its vital interests, a unique and one-time-only nuclear warning could be issued to the aggressor State to clearly demonstrate that the nature of the conflict has changed and to re-establish deterrence.”^{xii}



French ballistic missile submarine *Le Vigilant*
Ministry of Defence of France / <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/marine>

Public and Cross-party Support

Over the years, France’s nuclear deterrent has enjoyed great support among the French public: recent polls show that 81% of French citizens think that holding a national nuclear arsenal is an asset.^{xiii} Any thought that a transition to a Socialist government would change thinking on whether to maintain an independent nuclear capability was set to rest after the 1981 election of President Mitterrand, who decided to retain France’s nuclear deterrence doctrine.^{xiv} Subsequent debates on French nuclear power were mainly focused on the budget allocation for its maintenance and development over the years. Notably, during the 2012 presidential campaign, some groups advocated abandoning the airborne component to free up funds in the budget, but the then-soon-to-be-elected President Hollande quickly silenced them.^{xv}

While there are any number of contentious issues in current French politics, the value of the French nuclear capability to the overall deterrent posture is not one of them. Had Macron lost elections in 2017 or 2022, his opponents would likely have

taken similar positions: in 2017, both right-wing candidates Marine Le Pen (National Rally) and François Fillon (Republicans) advocated for an increase of the military budget to 2% of the GDP to maintain the *Force de Dissuasion*.^{xvi} On the other hand, left-wing candidates Jean-Luc Mélançon (La France Insoumise) and Benoît Hamon (Socialists) indicated that deterrence remained an essential element of national defense and that nuclear components should be renewed.^{xvii}

In 2022, the nuclear debate took a different turn, with candidates taking more diverse views on whether France should sign and abide by the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).^{xviii} In his 2020 speech, Macron had declared unequivocally that “France will not sign any treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.”^{xix} Anne Hidalgo (Socialists) and Yannick Jadot (Greens) took similar positions in stating that France should not sign the TPNW, but reaffirming that France should nonetheless comply with the disarmament objectives set out in Article VI of the NPT.^{xx} Fabien Roussel (French Communist Party) was in favor of multilateral negotiations for the reduction of nuclear weapons with an ultimate goal of total disarmament. Jean-Luc Mélançon was the only proponent of France’s committing to accede to the TPNW.

Nuclear France in a Proliferating World

Since the introduction of the NPT and its extension in 1995, France has consistently reiterated its commitment to the arms control stipulations in Article VI, albeit not to the point of abandoning its deterrent entirely.^{xxi} As stated by the Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations on 12 June 1968, “France will behave in the future exactly as the States complying with the Treaty. There should be no doubt in anyone’s mind on that score.”^{xxii} In specific terms, France took steps to reduce its own nuclear arsenal by halving its inventory of warheads between 1990 and 2005 and has since kept it at a 300-warhead threshold.^{xxiii}

The French public appears to support solidly the idea of France having a nuclear capability so long as others do, but they would support a more general reduction in nuclear weapons across the planet. According to a poll conducted in July 2021 by the Association de Soutien à l’Armée Française, 81% of the French population thought that it is an asset for their country to retain a nuclear arsenal.^{xxiv} However, a more recent survey from March 2022 organized by the Initiative pour le Désarmement Nucléaire found that, amidst the war in Ukraine, 70% considered that nuclear weapons jeopardize world security.^{xxv} On the arms control front, according to a poll conducted in September 2022 by the Institut d’études opinion et marketing en France et à l’international, 71% would like France to enter into negotiations with all the States concerned with reaching complete prohibition and elimination of nuclear and radioactive weapons.^{xxvi}

How Big an Umbrella?

In an interview broadcast on France 2 in October 2022, President Macron reiterated the conditions under which France would use its nuclear arsenal; that is, a direct nuclear attack on France’s territory or on the nation’s vital interests.^{xxvii} In public remarks, the definition of “vital interests” has encompassed the protection of France’s European neighbors and allies, although it ultimately remains at the discretion of the president.^{xxviii} Within NATO, Macron has declared France ready for “strategic dialogue to develop with our European partners, which are ready for it, on the role played by France’s nuclear deterrence in our collective security. European partners which are willing to walk that road can be associated with the exercises of French deterrence forces.”^{xxix}



Citadel Bonus 2013: Exercise Citadel Bonus is held on site within the Citadel of Lille, from 29 April to 3 May 2013, aimed at practising the coordination of air and sea components to neutralise a ballistic and chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear threat.

(NATO official / <https://tinyurl.com/2p9yjjsx>)

What it might mean for partners outside the alliance or the EU, however, is not clear. The question has become more current given growing fears that Russian President Putin may make use of a nuclear weapon in his war on Ukraine. A September 2022 poll conducted by the Consumer and Science Analytics Institute for CNEWS showed that 63% of the French worry about the possible Russian use of such weapons.^{xxx} In his interview with France 2, President Macron seemed to rule out the use of French nuclear weapons in such a scenario, stating that France’s “vital interests” “aren't something which would be at risk if, for example, there was a nuclear ballistic attack in Ukraine or the region.”^{xxxi,xxxii} French daily *Le Monde* queried this stance, and reported that “the president's office preferred to maintain ambiguity, by referring to his speech on deterrence in February 2020 and simply adding that ‘specific circumstances are taken into account.’”^{xxxiii} Speaking after Macron’s interview, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg affirmed that the existing NATO nuclear umbrella applies only to alliance members. While he downplayed the likelihood of a nuclear response, he nonetheless repeatedly declined to tip NATO's hand as to what form the “serious consequences” of a Russian nuclear attack in Ukraine would take.^{xxxiv}

Key Factors Shaping Future Developments:

- **The threat of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine is both increasing public interest in global nuclear arms reduction and raising specific questions about to whom and under what circumstances the French deterrent covers its partners.** Longstanding French nuclear policy is strategically ambiguous, and the position on Ukraine is in line with the rest of NATO, but these questions would become more pointed and urgent should Russia continue to make nuclear threats or actually launch an attack.
- **French politicians and citizens value their “sufficient” nuclear deterrent, but the public seems interested in working for a nuclear weapons-free world.** Greater engagement in multilateral disarmament talks by France (and the UK) might raise the moral and international public pressure for China and other second-level nuclear powers to engage more substantively.
- **The election of a government that might distance France from its allies should be expected to hold on even more firmly to the deterrent.** In her 2022 presidential campaign program proposal for National Defense and Rearming France, Le Pen stated that “France's participation in the integrated military command of this organization is incompatible with its status as a sovereign power, its diplomatic and military independence and the free definition of the use of its nuclear strike force France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command as of 2022 is thus justified by the same past reasons that led General de Gaulle to withdraw from it.”^{xxxv}

ⁱ Archives Nationales, "Allocution Prononcée à l'École Militaire, Paris Le 3 Novembre 1959 : Première Épreuve Annotée et Version Définitive (18 Vues Numériques)," https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/consultationIR.action?irlId=FRAN_IR_054957&udId=c-33e2et3r0--12h2j2h1aeije&details=true&numberImage=FRAN_0145_4091_L.

ⁱⁱ NATO, "France and NATO - 1949," NATO, n.d.

ⁱⁱⁱ As articulated by President Macron: "Our nuclear forces also significantly contribute to the overall strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance's overall deterrent, alongside the British and American forces. France does not take part in the Alliance's nuclear planning mechanisms and will not do so in the future. But it will continue to contribute to political-level discussions aiming to strengthen the Alliance's nuclear culture." Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," elysee.fr, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^{iv} Arms Control Association, "Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: France | Arms Control Association," Armscontrol.org, 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/franceprofile>.

^v Bruno Tertrais, "La Politique de Dissuasion Nucléaire Française," vie-publique.fr, July 22, 2022, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/285856-la-politique-de-dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-defense-budget>.

^{vi} President Macron took a similar position in the 2020 speech. Both sets of remarks reflect long-standing strategy expressed in documents like the 2013 White Paper on Defence and National Security. Vie Publique, "Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de La République, Sur Les Défis et Priorités de La Politique de Défense, à Toulon Le 19 Janvier 2018," vie-publique.fr, January 19, 2018, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/204784-declaration-de-m-emmanuel-macron-president-de-la-republique-sur-les-d>; Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," elysee.fr, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>; Representation Permanente de la France auprès de l'Organisation du Traité de l'Atlantique Nord, "White Paper on Defence and National Security," France NATO, April 29, 2013, <https://otan.delegfrance.org/White-Paper-on-Defence-and-National-Security>.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} The project of financial law for the armed forces is under discussion 10/18 at the Assemblée Nationale. Assemblée Nationale, "Projet de Loi de Finances 2023 : Audition Des Associations Professionnelles Nationales Des Militaires," Assemblée nationale, October 18, 2022, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/organes/commissions-permanentes/defense/actualites/projet-de-loi-de-finances-2023-audition-des-associations-professionnelles-nationales-des-militaires>.

^{ix} "On a daily basis, this objective brings together the soldiers from Operation Sentinelle, the patrol frigate, and the air defence patrol. In addition, as part of the permanent deterrence posture, the silent watch by our nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) crews and strategic air forces provides daily protection to our territory and population, and beyond that, our vital interests." Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," elysee.fr, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^x Bruno Tertrais, "La Politique de Dissuasion Nucléaire Française," vie-publique.fr, July 22, 2022, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/285856-la-politique-de-dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-defense-budget>.

^{xi} Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," elysee.fr, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Association de Soutien à l'Armée Française, "SONDAGE. Armes Nucléaires : Un Atout Pour 81% Des Français," www.asafrance.fr, July 4, 2021, <https://www.asafrance.fr/item/nucleaire-armes-nucleaires-un-atout-pour-81-des-francais.html>.

^{xiv} Yannick Pincé, "QUEL 'CONSENSUS' NUCLÉAIRE FRANÇAIS ?," Fondation Jean Jaurès, October 20, 2022, https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/quel-consensus-nucleaire-francais/?post_id=38840&export_pdf=1.

^{xv} Claude Le Borgne, "Jean Guisnel et Bruno Tertrais : Le Président et La Bombe ; Odile Jacob, 2016 ; 320 Pages," Revue Défense Nationale N° 793, no. 8 (October 1, 2016): 127–28, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.793.0127>.

^{xvi} Emmanuelle Maitre and Bruno Tertrais, "La Dissuasion Nucléaire En Campagne ; Élections Présidentielles 2017 :: Observatoire de La Dissuasion :: Fondation Pour La Recherche Stratégique :: FRS," www.frstrategie.org, April 2017, <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-de-la-dissuasion-nucleaire-campagne-elections-presidentielles-2017-2017>; Manon Meistermann, "Présidentielle 2017 : Comparez Les Programmes !," www.ifrap.org, May 3, 2017, <https://www.ifrap.org/etat-et-collectivites/presidentielle-2017-comparez-les-programmes>.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Emmanuelle Maitre and Bruno Tertrais, "Élections Présidentielles Françaises et Questions Nucléaires :: Observatoire de La Dissuasion :: Fondation Pour La Recherche Stratégique :: FRS," www.frstrategie.org, April 2022, <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-de-la-dissuasion/elections-presidentielles-francaises-questions>.

nucleaires-2022; Service politique et Les Décodateurs, "Comparez Les Programmes Des Candidats à l'Élection Présidentielle 2022," *Le Monde.fr*, February 16, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2022/02/16/election-presidentielle-2022-comparez-les-programmes-des-principaux-candidats_6113964_4355770.html; Matthieu Lasserre and Léo Durin, "Défense : Ce Qu'en Disent Les Candidats à La Présidentielle 2022," *La Croix*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Presidentielle-2022-proposent-candidats-defense-2022-03-04-1201203344>.

^{xix} Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," *elysee.fr*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^{xx} Macron has emphasized that France has already gone far to meet these goals by reducing its nuclear force to 300 warheads. Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," *elysee.fr*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^{xxi} Article VI calls on the acknowledged nuclear powers "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – UNODA," *Un.org*, 2022, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>.

^{xxii} France TNP, "La Dissuasion Nucléaire Française - FranceTNP / de l'Engagement Aux Actes," *www.francetnp.gouv.fr*, 2017, <https://www.francetnp.gouv.fr/la-dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-473>.

^{xxiii} Jean-Pierre Chevènement, "Désarmement, Non-Prolifération Nucléaires et Sécurité de La France," *www.senat.fr*, February 24, 2010, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r09-332/r09-332_mono.html.

^{xxiv} Association de Soutien à l'Armée Française, "SONDAGE. Armes Nucléaires : Un Atout Pour 81% Des Français," *www.asafrance.fr*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.asafrance.fr/item/nucleaire-armes-nucleaires-un-atout-pour-81-des-francais.html>.

^{xxv} IDN, "Pour 70% Des Français, l'Arme Nucléaire Met En Péril La Sécurité Du Monde !," Initiatives pour le Désarmement Nucléaire (IDN), May 23, 2022, <https://www.idn-france.org/nos-publications/communiqués/pour-les-francais-arme-nucleaire-met-en-peril-securite-monde/>.

^{xxvi} INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES OPINION ET MARKETING EN FRANCE ET À L'INTERNATIONAL, "Les Français et La Participation de La France à l'Abolition Des Armes Nucléaires et Radioactives - IFOP," IFOP, October 4, 2022, <https://www.ifop.com/publication/les-francais-et-la-participation-de-la-france-a-labolition-des-armes-nucleaires-et-radioactives/>.

^{xxvii} Elysee, "Le Président de La République Emmanuel Macron Était l'Invité de l'Émission Politique L'Événement Sur France 2.," *elysee.fr*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/10/12/le-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-est-lininvite-de-lemission-politique-levenement-sur-france-2>.

^{xxviii} Ibid.; Bruno Tertrais, "La Politique de Dissuasion Nucléaire Française," *vie-publique.fr*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/285856-la-politique-de-dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-defense-budget>.

^{xxix} Elysee, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," *elysee.fr*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

^{xxx} Yaël Benamou, "Sondage : 63% Des Français Ont Peur Que Vladimir Poutine Utilise l'Arme Nucléaire," *CNEWS*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.cnews.fr/france/2022-09-22/sondage-63-des-francais-ont-peur-que-vladimir-poutine-utilise-larme-nucleaire>.

^{xxxi} Elysee, "Le Président de La République Emmanuel Macron Était l'Invité de l'Émission Politique L'Événement Sur France 2.," *elysee.fr*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/10/12/le-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-est-lininvite-de-lemission-politique-levenement-sur-france-2>.

^{xxxii} Elise Vincent, "Macron Comment Raises Doubts on French Position in Case of Russian Nuclear Strike in Ukraine," *Le Monde.fr*, October 15, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/15/macron-comment-raises-doubts-on-french-position-in-case-of-russian-nuclear-strike-in-ukraine_6000434_4.html.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.

^{xxxiv} In a 18 October interview with Duetsche Welle at the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, NATO Secretary General continued to characterize the risk of a nuclear attack on Ukraine as "low" but that NATO is taking the risk "seriously" and is prepared "for all eventualities." NATO News, "NATO Secretary General Interview at Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, 18 OCT 2022," *www.youtube.com*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHXoljH1560&t=544s>. Mlafrance. 2022. "M LA DÉFENSE RÉARMER LA FRANCE-PUISSANCE."

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